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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes the incorporation of folk dances into the German curriculum on all instructional levels, from kindergarten to college. Learning and performing folk dances provides students not only with cultural information about foreign countries but also with specific structural features of the foreign language. The teacher can select certain dances to teach numbers, prepositions, grammatical cases, imperative forms, etc. Additionally, current publications on the topic of teaching folk dances are evaluated and discussed, including booklets and videos available in the United States. (Author)

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GERMAN FOLK DANCES: AN INNOVATIVE TEACHING TOOL

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Abstract

This paper proposes the incorporation of folk dances into the German curriculum on all instructional levels, from Kindergarten to college. Learning and performing folk dances provides the students not only with cultural information about foreign countries but also with specific structural features of the foreign language. The teacher can select certain dances, to teach numbers, prepositions, grammatical cases, imperative forms, etc. Additionally, current publications on the topic of teaching folk dances are evaluated and discussed, including booklets and videos available in the United States.

Introduction

One of the goals in foreign language teaching is communication, requiring as the first step that the students learn the appropriate grammatical structure vocabulary. Communication, in as well as the more advanced levels, however, goes beyond a mere verbal exchange. Kramsch (1983:177) states:

> Because of its interpersonal nature, the communication process is permeated by social and cultural attitudes, values and emotions. Communication is a socialization process that involves the whole personal and social development of the learner. When it takes place in a foreign language it is, in addition, a process of acculturation in which students learn forms of conversational behavior, which are, for the most part, foreign to them.

Traditionally, acculturation is accomplished in the classroom with the help of various audio-visual techniques, in addition to cultural information contained in reading passages and printed conversations. Some textbooks offer children's and folk songs usually placed in an appendix to be used at the discretion of the instructor. Most standard curricula, however, totally neglect folk dances as an important aspect of the culture in the German-speaking countries. At a time when 'cultural literacy' is warranted in the classroom, they are an interesting alternative to the traditional curriculum, suitable to teach not only cultural aspects but also structural features of the foreign language. This paper will demonstrate how the teaching of folk dances can be used in the classroom with children and with young adults in high school and college.

Discussion

The socialization process among children involves, to a large extent, role playing and play acting. Therefore, folk dances for children are very useful to teach them certain aspects of grammar and vocabulary in a playful manner. Some dances, for example, serve the purpose of teaching numbers, either for the counting of a certain number of steps or in connection with physical activities. *Es geht eine Zipfelmuetz* 'A Peaked Cap Walks Around In Our Circle' is a good example. In the second part of the dance, the children have to multiply and add (up to ten). For example,

> *Dreimal drei ist neune, du weisst ja, wie ich's meine, dreimal drei und eins ist zehn, Zipfelmuetz bleibt stehn.*

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'Three times three is nine, you know what I mean, three times three plus one is ten, the peaked cap stops walking'.

In the third part of this dance, students act out various physical activities and, therefore, have to be familiar with the meaning of the verbs:

sie ruetteln sich, sie schuetteln sich, sie werf'n die Beine hinter sich, sie klatschen in die Hand...
They shake and they wiggle, they kick up their heels, they clap their hands...

Most children's dances are performed in a circle and can accommodate any number of participants. And since the melody is sung by the children themselves, they learn the foreign words immediately. In other dances, daily activities in the household or in traditional crafts are performed by the children, who learn many action verbs. The dance *Zeigt her eure Fuesschen*, for example, describes in nine verses all the activities required for doing the laundry the old-fashioned way: The children have to demonstrate the washing, rinsing, wringing out, hanging on the clothesline, folding, pressing, and ironing. In the last two verses, they rest up and celebrate their accomplishment by dancing. Several folk dances also include pointing out or describing different parts of the body which must be learned. Some very important grammatical aspects of folk dancing are the dative and accusative case (especially after the two-way prepositions in German) and the imperative forms, whether inherent in the dance itself or used by the caller giving directions. The dancers will not meet their partners, for example, if they don't know the difference between *komm zu mir* 'come to me' and *geh von mir* 'go away from me'. An error could result in total confusion, in one dancer suddenly having two new partners, or the next one having none.

In classes with high school or college students, these structural aspects of the foreign language can still be taught through folk dancing, but information about cultural history can be added regarding the special costumes, the music, different customs, dialects, etc. Folk dances are basically dance forms that have been passed down from generation to generation. Until the beginning of the industrial revolution, they changed relatively little since the lifestyle and working habits of the farmers and craftsmen remained largely the same in the predominately agricultural societies. In the German-speaking countries of today, traditional folk dances are still performed at certain holidays and festivals, intricately linked to old customs and religious faith. These folk or regional festivals are based on local calendars for traditional agriculture events, on religious holidays, or on milestones in the course of human lives, such as the birth of a child, coming of age, courtship, or marriage. Folk dances are also performed here in the United States in areas with a large population of German, Austrian, or Swiss ancestry, such as Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, and the Baltimore-Washington area.

In most European countries, there are two basic groups of folk dances: Ritual-ceremonial dances, and so-called "social" dances. The first group is usually performed by men only, and is typically associated with local customs throughout the course of the year. Examples are special dances during the winter carnival season, at Easter time, the dance around the maypole, the midsummer festival, and at harvest time. Certain dances can require special costumes, such as the frightening masks and outfits of the mummers. Frequently, members of certain trades and craft guilds perform dances in their colorful costumes that illustrate their professional activities, such as the woodcutters or lumberjacks of the Alpine region, the miners in Suabia.

The so-called "social dances," on the other hand, are performed by the population as a whole, understood as the celebration of a communal get-together, not in the sense of "social or ballroom dances." This kind of dance must accommodate both sexes and all age groups, since the children learn the dances by mimmicking their elders. Usually, the older people in the community lead the dances which are always accompanied by music or song. In our times, the music is frequently played by cassettes, but the traditional way is a live band of varying size. Typical instruments for folk music and folk dancing are violin (fiddle), recorder and flute, clarinet, guitar, harmonica, and brass instruments. These dances can be performed in two different ways. The most common one is danced by larger groups of males and females, sometimes including children, usually in a circle and with a "caller." The other kind is performed by a certain number of male-female pairs of dancers. From the sixteenth century on, the names of the older dances reveal their geographic or national origin: *Steirischer* from Austria, Viennese Waltz, Czech or Polish polka, Polish or French polonaise, etc.

The polonaise is the simplest form of a folk dance where any number of individual dancers can participate by walking around the room to the tune of a polonaise or a hiking song, such as "The Happy Wanderer." The "marchers" meet at the end of the room, walk back in pairs or groups of four, and walk in several geometric patterns. The next group in terms of increasing difficulty is the children's dances which I use to introduce my college students to folk dancing.[1] Later, we progress to regular adult folk dances in the "social" category in order to let any number of students participate.

For each new dance, I prepare the students by giving them the relevant cultural background, including the geographic area, the objects or tools used for the dance, if any, and the meaning of the dance. If the melody is to be sung by the dancers, I prepare a list of the new words and explain their meaning in this particular context. Then, the class practices the different dance steps without music to gain a feel for the movements and the rhythm. Next, the students dance the separate parts with music, and, finally, perform the complete dance in an uninterrupted fashion.

There are presently some very useful booklets and videos available in this country for the teaching of German folk dances.

1. *Zum Singen und Tanzen - The Song and Dance Book for Students of German* (1987) is divided into two parts and contains 23 songs for various occasions, and five folk dances. The dances range from the relatively easy *Siebenschritt* to the difficult *Schuhplattler*. They are described in simple terms, and sometimes show the formation in a diagram. The explanations are provided entirely in English.

2. *Volkstaenze* (no date) offers eleven dances, from *Herr Schmidt* to the *Schuhplattler* that are arranged in order of increasing difficulty. The booklet provides extensive and clear definitions and explanations of the basic terminology, the different formations of the dancers, and the individual steps. It is written entirely in German and well suited for the high school and college level.

3. Perhaps the best available teaching tools, are the two videos *German Folk Dances* (1987 and 1989) where students from Clear Creek Secondary School in Idaho Springs, Colorado, present Austrian, German, and Swiss dances in authentic costumes and take the viewer literally step by

step through all phases of the dances. Each kit contains the video cassette and an audio cassette with voice instructions during the dances on one side and the uninterrupted dance only on the other side (for performance in public). Also included is a booklet containing very useful hints on teaching folk dancing, cultural information and costume notes, and written instructions for each dance. The booklets are written in English and give detailed instructions which are then reinforced by observing the dancers who demonstrated the steps and movements. Both videos show one dance each from Austria, Germany, and Switzerland at varying levels of difficulty.[2] In addition to these materials, there are many recordings and publications of folk dances available in Germany and Austria.

Conclusion

This paper described how the teaching of folk dances can aid in one aspect of the acculturation process in the foreign language classroom. An advantage of this method is that it is not restricted to any one age level, and it can be incorporated into curricula from kindergarten to graduate school. Beyond school, dancers can join one of the many clubs in the United States whose main purpose is to learn and perform Austrian, German, and Swiss folk dances. As López (1989:2) writes in her "Notes to the Teacher":

> We all know how much folk dances are a part of a foreign culture. Not only are they an important element of foreign festivals and celebrations today, but they teach us much about the history, geography, attitudes, traditions and daily lives of foreign people. By actually doing a folk dance the student will be learning about the foreign culture without ever taking out a pen and paper - and he will remember it longer, too.

She also notes (1989:16) that "Dancing has been and still is an integral part of German celebrations. There are many types of folk dances but they share a common element of fun".

Endnotes

1. However, I do *not* tell my students that they are performing *children's* dances; I simply tell them that these are very easy to learn and to do.

2. The videos are well edited and suitable for high school and College students.

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